

Harness the Power of Experience for Personal and Business

Breakthroughs

**SOREN KAPLAN** 

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### Praise for Experiential Intelligence

"Experiential Intelligence delivers a simple yet powerful framework for nextgeneration leaders to delve deeper into how their life's experiences shape who they are and how they show up and lead."

—Jennifer Sparks Taylor, Director of Corporate Relations & Executive Education, Center for Effective Organizations, USC Marshall School of Business

"Experiential Intelligence uses powerful storytelling to take us on a journey to deeply understand our own XQ and how to maximize the impact it has on our leadership and business success."

—Pat Verduin, PhD, Chief Technology Officer, Colgate-Palmolive

"The ability to understand your inherent capabilities as a product of life experiences is the essence of experiential intelligence. Leaders can harness XQ to unlock their own hidden strengths and that of their teams to drive transformation."

—Valencia Bembry, Vice President of Philanthropy, United Nations Foundation

"With the increased awareness of how an individual's unique contributions and lived experiences can bring about transformation to the workplace, the new lens of experiential intelligence broadens the talent conversation and opens possibilities for building a more diverse workforce."

—Rebecca Romano, Global Head of Talent & Organizational Development, NBCUniversal "Experiential Intelligence is a long overdue blueprint to more intentionally access the mindsets, abilities, and know-how gained from your unique life experience. I highly recommend that you add this book to your learning journey."

> —Michael J. Arena, Vice President of Talent & Development, Amazon Web Services and former Chief Talent Officer, General Motors

"Experiential intelligence complements IQ and EQ to comprehensively assess and build the disruptive capacity of your employees and organization."

> —Rich Goudis, Executive Vice Chairman, Tupperware Brands and former CEO, Herbalife Nutrition

"Experiential Intelligence provides an approach for how to gain self-awareness into your unique assets to foster both personal and professional growth. Soren's book gives keen insights into how the experiences we have form our current mindsets and how to examine our own self-limiting beliefs."

—Kathryn J. Coleman, PhD, Senior Vice President, Talent, Learning & Insights, 3M

"Experiential Intelligence reveals how to create a culture of empowerment and innovation that enables true sustainable growth and engagement."

—Rachael Orleans, Head of Change & Transformation, Cigna

"Soren Kaplan wades courageously into a half century of deep and often polarizing research on human intellect and emerges with a brilliant synthesis that provides the much-needed third leg of the intelligence stool. Experiential intelligence is the perfect complement to IQ and EQ."

—Matthew E. May, coauthor of What A Unicorn Knows: How Leading Entrepreneurs Use Lean Principles to Drive Sustainable Growth

"Reframing who and how we hire is more important than ever! With shifting strategies, priorities, and a quickly changing world, companies should be looking at the metrics for employees that really matter. *Experiential Intelligence* is the ultimate guide to equip leaders to know who has the talent they need to propel their business into the future."

—Dr. Marshall Goldsmith. Thinkers50 #1 Executive Coach and New York Times bestselling author of The Earned Life, Triggers, and What Got You Here Won't Get You There

"Experiential Intelligence provides an enlightening look at how to achieve personal and professional success and satisfaction."

-Michael Isip, President & CEO, KQED, PBS Public Media, San Francisco

"'Learning by doing' has long been a tenet of the educational process as it motivates and promotes participation. I am grateful to finally have a book that provides concrete examples of how experiential learning can shape the mindsets, abilities, and skills that not only help students succeed, but can also lead to personal growth, development, and success for the adults who work with them!"

—Maura Palmer, Superintendent, Salem New Hampshire Public School District

"In a world in which false assumptions are regularly at play in human relations, this book mines the treasures latent in all human beings and helps us welcome unknown talent in ourselves and others."

-Kent Packard-Davis, President, Women Forward International

"Many successful performers don't have Ivy League degrees, so there are clearly indicators of readiness beyond academic credentials. So what is the comparative value of fifteen years of experience? Does experiential intelligence deliver something a prestigious college degree does not? These are important questions to consider. From an equity perspective, we also know that both race and socioeconomics can unfairly limit education and career potential. This understanding helps companies recalibrate for and reconsider individual potential, while delivering improved access to untapped talent pools."

—Melissa Jones, Executive Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer, California State Automobile Association Insurance Group

"Experiential Intelligence artfully blends concrete research with compelling storytelling to clearly show what leads to success. Let Soren Kaplan guide you to higher performance as a leader and for your organization."

—Juan Sanchez, Group Vice President, HCA Healthcare

"This must-read book delivers deep insight into how our personal and professional experiences influence how we show up and perform at work, in our relationships, and life itself."

—Dr. Loressa Cole, CEO, American Nurses Association

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## EXPERIENTIAL INTELLIGENCE



#### **Chapter One Video Overview**

ompanies including Google, Apple, Tesla, IBM, Home Depot, Bank of America, Starbucks, and Hilton no longer require a university degree for an interview. These organizations understand that future success relies on way more than diplomas.

For a long time, a person's IQ served as the symbol of intellectual prowess and a general predictor of future achievement. Emotional Intelligence (EQ) then expanded our view of what leads to success across business, relationships, and life. EQ elevated our awareness of the importance of tuning into our emotions and the emotions of others for personal and professional growth.

People like Maya Angelou, Ellen DeGeneres, Whoopi Goldberg, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, Jerry Yang, Mark Zuckerberg,

Soichiro Honda, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Jeremy Corbyn, Russell Simmons, Rachael Ray, Vidal Sassoon, and Ansel Adams have seen extraordinary success. No college degrees for any of them.

At the same time, not all of the wildly successful people I just listed are necessarily known for their off-the-charts IQs. Nor are all of them famous for being extraordinarily empathetic, emotionally grounded, or softhearted. Some may be more intellectually or emotionally intelligent than the norm, but there are of course others who are either smarter or more empathetic. So having a high IQ or EQ doesn't perfectly correlate to "success," if you define success in the form of notoriety and achievement.

Here's the problem. Even with all the available models and measures, something's missing today that doesn't quite capture how our individual intricacies can, and do, contribute to both success and satisfaction in life. We need a way to understand how everything we've obtained from our unique life experiences—no matter how mundane or significant—holistically contributes to our ability to show up in the world and achieve our goals. We need a way to articulate and justify why we might want to hire someone who's not "officially" qualified for a job, but who we know will do a great job anyway. We need a way to recognize the inherent wisdom and strength that exist in all of us because of what we've done and experienced in both our personal and professional lives. And we need a way to make the process of understanding, appreciating, and leveraging the power of unique experiences and differences something that we embrace in our teams, organizations, communities, and personal lives.

We're on the cusp of a revolution in understanding and articulating what leads to success and satisfaction personally and professionally. We're starting to see organizations, academics, and the popular press recognize that there's a broader way to look at intelligence. We've understood for a while that we need to tap into the intellect to solve problems. We've also embraced the importance of tuning into emotions as an important tool for leading and working with other people. We're just now starting to fully appreciate that, to effectively operate in today's world and adapt to the fast-paced, disruptive changes happening all around us, we need to tap into a different dimension of our intelligence—the intelligence developed out of experience.

There's a slang term that touches the surface of this seemingly intangible intelligence: "street smarts." Street smarts is usually used to describe people with a lack of formal education to indicate they're actually "smart," but not in the traditional sense of the term. They've learned to survive in tough situations. They've developed abilities to do certain things that give them an edge in life. But even the idea of being street smart or having some type of know-how ignores the deeper process that *created* this intelligence in the first place. It's not just about the hard skills we may develop to do something; it's also about the way we think and the abilities we develop that become part of who we are as people.

Experiential Intelligence (XQ) is the combination of mindsets, abilities, and know-how gained from your unique life experience that empowers you to achieve your goals. XQ provides a holistic way to understand what's needed for success in today's world by getting in touch with the accumulated wisdom and talents you have gained over time through your lived experience.

Certain disciplines recognize the value of Experiential Intelligence without calling it XQ by name. "Extreme users," for example,

are people who spend an inordinate amount of time doing something at the extreme edge of what's considered "normal." Market researchers like to talk to extreme users because their knowledge of the ins and outs of a topic runs deep from their personal experience, much more so than that of the average person.

Think about a teenager who spends hours and hours playing a favorite video game. Perhaps the situation is a nightmare for their parents, but the video-gaming teen understands the subtle nuances of the game, its social networks, its underlying business model, and probably more. The teen gamer most likely didn't learn the rules from a printed user guide, but rather from direct experience.

Or consider someone who loves coffee so much that they test a new brand every time they go to the store. They experiment with different types of bean grinders and ways to brew the coffee, including French presses, AeroPresses, handheld espresso makers, stovetop espresso makers, coffee bags, pour-overs, and siphons. Extreme users get to know something so well they become an expert by virtue of their lived experience—and not just an expert that has knowledge, but an expert who innately understands how to do something. Their abilities flow naturally.

In my own case, I became an extreme user of sorts, not by choice, but by necessity. My parents met at an event for students who had been awarded scholarships to attend graduate school at Harvard University. It was the late 1960s. My father, driven by his desire to discover the meaning of life, dove into studying theology. My mother, who attended an international high school in the Himalayas and grew up meditating with the monks, was his perfect match. She wanted to understand the common threads underlying the world's religions.

The general disillusionment that permeated their generation, combined with their intense impatience with finding their higher purpose, hit them hard. They dropped out of Harvard to live on a commune with the spiritual teacher Richard Alpert, also known as Ram Dass. I was six months old at the time. It was there that we met a guy named Danny. Danny was Daniel Goleman, who would later go on to popularize the term *Emotional Intelligence*. Goleman introduced my parents to the teachings of an Indian guru named Meher Baba, who became their unwavering spiritual focus for years to come.

We moved to California when I was three so we could be near other people who followed Meher Baba like my parents. My father, who worked multiple jobs to make ends meet and was consumed by his spiritual pursuits at nights and on the weekends, was rarely home. Just after my sister was born, my mother's mental illness emerged. Most people couldn't fathom that my mother, who had been valedictorian of her high school, attended prestigious East Coast universities, and was stunningly beautiful with an engaging personality, could become mentally ill. The slow onset of her illness, combined with the interpretation made by my parents' spiritual community that my mother's unusual behavior was an "awakening," created a chaotic and confusing home life for me and my sister. Just like how extreme users develop unique mindsets and abilities from their extensive experiences, I gained certain assets precisely because I lived in an unpredictable environment with little structure for many years.

As paradoxical as it may sound, the same things that traumatized me in my childhood also delivered unique gifts. My unusual upbringing led me to develop mindsets and abilities to adapt to my situation that still serve me positively in many ways today. At the same time,

however, I developed defense mechanisms from the same process of adapting to my environment. I learned to automatically "turn off" my emotions when they became too uncomfortable. I also adopted a judgmental mindset that influenced my outlook on the world—that if others didn't do things like I would do them myself, then they were doing them wrong. My judgment of others protected me from my fear that I was going to be judged by others for my mother's odd behavior and my family's affiliation with a fringe spiritual group. I blocked off my emotions while creating a black-and-white view of the world. As a result, for many years, my "compart-mentalization" created barriers to my self-awareness and ultimately my personal and professional success. It took effort and some time, but once I was able to view my life experiences in a new light, I became more capable of seeing both my self-limiting beliefs and hidden assets all at the same time.

As I grew up and started adult life, small glimpses of the hidden strengths borne of my childhood challenges popped up every now and then. One of my first jobs was at a consulting firm that had an open office floor plan. It was a beautiful space with twenty-foot ceilings in the old Ghirardelli chocolate factory building at the end of Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco. We named the office space "The Fish Tank" because it was simply a large room with brick walls and windows that overlooked the Bay and Alcatraz Island—plus, we had mobiles of colorful fish hanging around the room. During Fleet Week every fall, we could see the tourists wandering around far below and the US Navy Blue Angels flying high above.

With about eight of us in the office, the consultants' loud chatter filled the room each day. It was my job to conduct research and write reports for this extroverted crew. I didn't realize it at the time, but the chaotic environment of the office led me to draw upon a hidden ability that I had developed during childhood. When I responded to an email, wrote a report, read an article, or did just about anything else that required attention, I literally couldn't hear the people around me. I had learned to tune out my surroundings early in life to cope with stressful situations. Essentially, I had developed an uncanny ability to overcome chaos and distractions to focus. In one of my first performance reviews, the partner running the consulting firm specifically mentioned my unique skill as a quirky, yet valuable, ability for getting things done.

## A NEW LENS FOR UNDERSTANDING EXPERIENCE

"You're the sum of your experiences" is a common catchphrase. But what does it really mean? Experiential Intelligence is much more than the set of accomplishments on your résumé. It also isn't merely what you've learned over time. Just as memorizing a bunch of facts doesn't give you a high IQ, your list of life lessons is not "intelligence" in and of itself. That's where XQ comes in.

Experiential Intelligence provides a new lens from which to view what makes you, you—and what makes your team and organization unique. It provides a framework for harnessing your past while not being bound by it, so that you can proactively create your desired future. XQ consists of three elements:

- **Mindsets:** Your attitudes and beliefs about yourself, other people, and the world
- Abilities: Your competencies that help you integrate your knowledge, skills, and experiences so you can respond to situations in the most effective way possible
- Know-How: Your knowledge and skills

When it comes to **mindsets**, you may be conscious of your attitudes and beliefs, but certain ones may be just below the surface of your awareness. Your attitudes and beliefs can either get in your way or help you achieve great things. If, for instance, you hold the belief, "I can't fail or people will judge me," then you'll most likely shy away from anything that feels risky. As a result, you won't be very innovative, as risk-taking is needed for any type of significant change. This type of belief is called a *self-limiting belief* because it limits your possibilities.

When you fully tap into your Experiential Intelligence, you're able to uncover the self-limiting beliefs you hold. As you peel back the proverbial onion, you can also discover *why* you hold the belief, and then consciously use your newfound insight to reinvent your mindset. A new, self-expanding belief can then replace the self-limiting belief, so that "I can't afford to fail" turns into "I'm comfortable with failure because I learn from it, and it's necessary for innovation."

As for **abilities**, they allow you to unite your knowledge, skills, and experiences to effectively apply what you know. Abilities are specific competencies that bridge your mindsets with your know-how. Great authors, for example, have good writing *skills*, but many authors also have an *ability* related to personal discipline. This ability is often tied to

a belief that focus and persistence is needed to write a book. This mindset and ability lead to specific behaviors, like setting time aside to write every day and finding exactly the right words to convey the meaning they want to communicate—both of which then become skills. Great innovators often possess the ability to tolerate a high degree of uncertainty and bounce back from setbacks. Many people who have experienced hard times, big disappointments, or major curveballs in their lives and have come out the other side to thrive often have abilities tied to grit and resilience. In the business world, when we talk about someone who deeply understands how to navigate negotiations, manage the ins and outs of growing a business, and deal with demanding customers, we say that person has a high degree of "business acumen." Your abilities represent broader approaches to how you do what you do, so you can apply what you know how to do in different contexts. Your mindsets guide what you see as possible and desirable, which influences where and how you decide to apply your abilities.

Know-how includes your knowledge and skills. When it comes to knowledge, there's the information and facts you might get from school, taking workshops, reading books, or watching educational videos. That's what we call "formal knowledge." It's learned through some sort of documentation. There's also what's known as "informal knowledge," or "tacit knowledge." Tacit knowledge is learned through experience informally. Tacit knowledge often comes from doing something repeatedly over time. We learn tacitly because we spend time practicing something or in the presence of another person, absorbing their knowledge by osmosis. In the field of education, many people call this "craft knowledge"—knowledge that's developed through experiential learning activities that include practical problem-solving.



**Three Building Blocks of XQ** 

Mindsets, Abilities, and Know-How are the Building Blocks of XQ

Mindsets, abilities, and know-how collectively comprise XQ. When we treat these components as building blocks, with know-how as the base, abilities in the middle, and mindsets at the top, we get a progression from the tangible to the more amorphous and difficult to measure. This model also suggests a progression when it comes to self-awareness. Understanding that you possess certain knowledge and skills generally comes more easily than seeing your broader abilities. Recognizing that you possess specific mindsets that influence your thinking and behavior is even more challenging.

#### **DEVELOPING XQ IS A DYNAMIC PROCESS**

We all possess Experiential Intelligence because we all have past experiences that influence where we are today. Your XQ increases as your level of self-awareness of your mindsets, abilities, and know-how increases. XQ is dynamic because how you might describe the mindsets you hold and abilities you possess at one point in your life could differ at a later point. The more you do something and have experiences in a certain area of life or business, the more you'll develop greater abilities and know-how. Your mindsets can also evolve based on insights that you gain about yourself, others, and the world in general over time.

For example, it's unusual to hold a mindset that involves a self-limiting belief like "I can't afford to fail" while at the same time tolerating an extreme level of ambiguity. More likely than not, "I can't fail" connects to a personal ability related to "attentive to detail" or "highly organized." Changing your mindsets can shift your abilities in the same direction. Alia Crum, who runs the Mind & Body Lab at Stanford University, says that mindsets can be self-fulfilling.\(^1\) Crum's research shows that a certain level of stress in people's lives can enhance mind and body performance—as long as the person thinks stress can be helpful to them rather than just harmful. In one of Crum's studies, people who viewed stress as beneficial versus debilitating showed fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression, greater optimism, and improved work performance. It's a powerful concept: if you're someone who feels more comfortable when in control and your mindset shifts toward embracing more ambiguity in life, your abilities may

shift away from "managing details" and toward "creativity and innovation." You get more of what you believe.

Growing your XQ is a choice that involves exploring your past experiences, understanding how you were positively or negatively impacted, gaining insight into what you're consciously or subconsciously holding onto that helps or hinders you, and learning how to frame and reframe all this to evolve your mindsets and abilities to achieve your goals.

Exploring and developing your XQ can be quite effective when done as a collaborative activity. Although you can go it alone, feedback from others, and even helping others with their own process of developing XQ, amplifies XQ for yourself and everyone involved. Early in my career, I led a small team in the change management group at HP, the computer and printer giant in Silicon Valley. Our management team decided to ditch the standard performance evaluation process because it required creating a bell-curve distribution of high and low performers. To follow corporate guidelines and do it "right," our group would have had to force some people into the low-performing category, no matter how well we did as a team or how well they had actually performed during the year. We revolted.

Instead of having individual mangers rank their direct reports, we assembled "coaching groups" that included our team members, clients, partners, and any others who had worked with us during the year. The process was simple: list examples of our work, uncover the themes within those examples that revealed the strengths of the individual, and then identify opportunities for further growth and development. Though we didn't use the words "Experiential Intelligence,"

the process revealed the mindsets and abilities of the person being evaluated. It also revealed opportunities for the individual to take their performance to the next level, usually through projects with the very people in the room who had just helped uncover and identify the person's growth opportunities.

The process created greater accountability to the team on the part of the individual and commitment from all involved to support the individual's development, which ultimately led to a more effective and productive organizational culture. We referred to the approach as "generative" because it left everyone involved energized and with a sense of how we were all in this personal growth process together. As our team began to experience the highly supportive and deeply transformative process, the culture of our group shifted in ways that recognized and reinforced our interdependence and collaboration. As others across the organization learned of the process, they also scrapped the traditional performance evaluation model and replaced it with ours, which began to positively impact the broader organization's culture.

Here's how Experiential Intelligence works, and how it supported our team's process:

- Experiences shape mindsets that involve attitudes and beliefs about ourselves, other people, and the world.
- Our mindsets influence our thoughts and behavior and either help us or hold us back from achieving our full potential.
- When we become aware of our underlying mindsets, we see with a new lens.

- With a new lens, we can change our attitudes and beliefs, allowing us to tap into and apply our abilities in new ways.
- When we vulnerably share our experiences with those we trust, we accelerate the entire process for everyone involved.

Experiential Intelligence is your unique internal fingerprint. No one else possesses your distinct combination of mindsets and abilities because no one else has lived your experience. But unlike fingerprints that don't change over time, you can grow your XQ.

When we understand what's happened to us using a strengths-based lens, we gain the opportunity to expand our beliefs about the past, which can influence our attitudes about the future. Instead of ruminating on the past, feeling like a victim, or thinking of ourselves as broken, we start seeing unique assets that we may have developed from our experiences. When we shift our thoughts, we shift our feelings. New thoughts and feelings lead to new behavior, which in turn will help us achieve our goals. It's easier to move through the past when you have a compelling future pulling you forward.

Developing your XQ isn't a one-and-done deal. And it's not always linear. It's an ongoing process of increasing self-awareness to identify and overcome unhelpful mindsets, and then replace them with new ones that help you tap into your hidden assets. It's a journey of advancing your personal abilities and know-how. Sometimes you might feel like you're not making much progress. Other times, you might be pleasantly surprised by the big leaps you've made in a short amount of time.

The approaches to growing your XQ that I outline in the chapters ahead include tools that anyone can use to transform themselves,

their team, and their organization. While I've designed an assessment and templates using a step-by-step process, there's no one right way to develop your XQ. It may be just as valuable for you to skip around, diving into one tool first and then going back to revisit others. And these tools can be applied, put aside, and revisited over time. Growing your XQ is an iterative process, so there's no fixed timeline hanging over your head.

Humility combined with vulnerability is the fuel used in developing XQ. It starts with seeing and accepting yourself as both exceedingly capable and perfectly imperfect all at the same time. When you find others willing to reciprocate open sharing, acceptance, and curiosity, the process accelerates. Developing your XQ can become a flywheel—the more you develop it, the more you'll want to develop it further. The more you help others develop their own XQ, the more you'll develop it yourself.

#### **CHAPTER ONE KEY MESSAGES:**

- Experiential Intelligence, or XQ for short, is the combination of mindsets, abilities, and know-how gained from your unique life experience that empowers you to achieve your goals.
- Mindsets are your attitudes and beliefs about yourself, other people, and the world that influence your personal and professional success.
- Abilities are your personal competencies that help you integrate all that you have gained from your experience so you can respond to situations in the most effective way possible.

- Know-how is your knowledge and skills.
- XQ is your unique internal fingerprint—no one else possesses your distinct combination of mindsets, abilities, and knowhow because no one else has lived your experience.

# Get the Experiential Intelligence Toolkit

Get the XQ Toolkit, a practical set of digital tools that you can use to develop your Experiential Intelligence and apply it to your team and organization.



- Group discussion guide
- Presentation templates
- Videos
- Interview guide
- 360 development process
- and more!

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